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PREHISTORIC ART OF THE ALEUTIAN ISLANDS

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INTRODUCTION

The prehistory of the Aleutian Islands remains somewhat of an enigma despite the archaeological investigations of the past three-quarters of a century. During this time interpretations of the evidence have differed radically. For instance, Dall (1877) concluded that there have been three distinct, successive periods of culture, each based on a different economy: (1) shellfish gathering, (2) fishing, and (3) hunting. Jochelson (1925) decided that there had been no temporal changes in Aleutian culture. Hrdlička (1945) concluded that there had been two distinct and separate cultures associated with two distinct and separate physical types: Aleut and pre-Aleut.

In my opinion none of these interpretations is correct. From a review of the published reports and a survey of recent collections in Chicago Natural History Museum and the American Museum of Natural History I would hypothecate a gradual change in both culture and physical type from the time of first occupancy of the Aleutians to the arrival of the Russians in 1741.

Although this gradual change in culture and in the physical characteristics of population is difficult to demonstrate now, I suspect that eventually a graded sequence of minor changes in physical type will be easier to demonstrate than the temporal changes in culture. However, any additional consideration of physical types is beyond the scope of this paper. Here I am concerned only with cultural change through time. Moreover, I am concerned with such cultural change only in a preliminary fashion, a beginning, perhaps, for the study of cultural change in Aleutian archaeology.

There are many limitations to the study of cultural change by archaeological techniques. First of all, the archaeologist deals with

only a small fragment of the total culture, perhaps one per cent. The archaeologist is not only limited to the study of material culture, but he is further limited to the study of its non-perishable elements, which vary with climate, age, place, and soil. Thus the cultural manifestation studied by the archaeologist is often a planless hodge-podge—a thing of sherds and patches. Therefore, the first and major limitation of the archaeologist is the cultural assemblages with which he works.

Another limitation to the study of culture change is the lack of objects in quantities sufficient for classification and comparison by site or levels within a site. Particularly is this true in the Aleutian Islands. Elsewhere sherds, harpoon points, or other objects have been found in sufficient quantities so that the stylistic changes of classes of these objects in space or time or both have provided some insight into the changes of the cultures of which the objects were once a part. But archaeological sites in the Aleutian Islands have not produced classes of artifacts in quantities. Therefore, it is difficult to inject a time perspective into Aleutian prehistory by either seriation or stratigraphy.

The most obvious criteria for the establishment of a tentative time perspective in Aleutian archaeology are art styles—designs and elements of design appearing on different classes of objects. Although the objects that are decorated may vary considerably and may not occur in quantities suitable for classification, there are enough decorated objects so that designs and design elements as classes may be manipulated with some degree of success.

With the aid of designs and elements of design and some stratigraphy it is possible to separate the Aleutian cultural continuum into at least three overlapping periods: early, middle and late. Although I shall not now attempt to demonstrate it, other cultural data from the Aleutians show differences of style and frequency that seem to correlate with these three periods.

In a previous article (1945), I tentatively formulated only two periods of Aleut art styles, an early period and a late period. I now wish to replace this earlier concept of two periods with a hypothesis of three periods.

ART STYLES OF THE EARLY PERIOD

The early period is represented by two art styles. The first style consists of designs that are simple, linear, and deeply cut. The

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FIG. 14. Design styles of the early period. Scale 2:3.

execution of the design is crude. The composition is longitudinal and involves some use of most of the available space on the objects that were decorated (fig. 14, A-J). Generally, these objects were large lance-heads or barbed harpoon heads of bone.

The elements of design of this style are straight lines, paired lines, transverse lines in groups, short isolated lines, pseudo-spurred lines, zig-zags, and X's. Although this style does not specifically

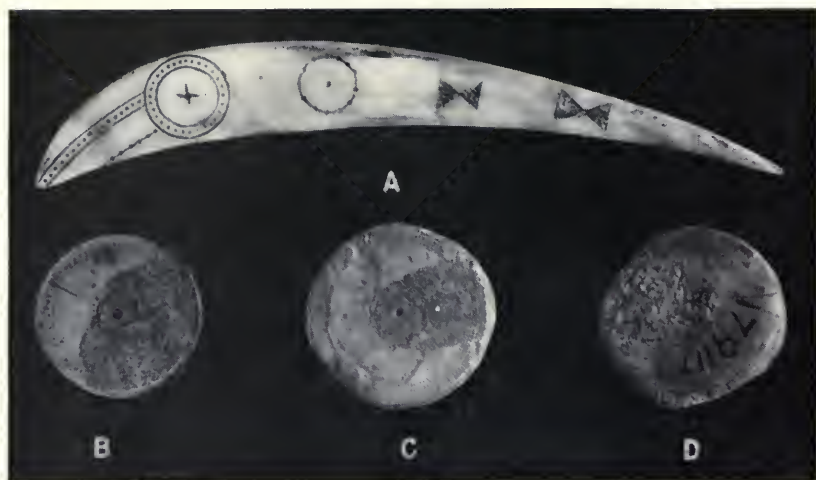


FIG. 15. Design styles of the early period. Scale 6:7.

resemble that of any other Eskimo group or period, it is reminiscent of the Dorset art in the eastern Arctic.

The second art style representative of the early period consists of designs that are simple, curvilinear, and precise (fig. 15, A-D). The composition generally emphasizes the decorated border of the objects. The elements of design are large, compass-drawn dot and circles; compass-drawn dots and arcs; hachured X's; and rows of dots closely spaced. This art style so far is confined to ivory ornaments, most of which are cylindrical. However, a crescent-shaped ivory ornament decorated in this style is illustrated in figure 15, A.¹ The designs seem to have been engraved on the ivory with metal tools, at least one of which obviously was similar to the modern compass used in mechanical drawing.

¹ This ornament and the cylindrical object shown in figure 15, B, from the bottom levels of the D site are not in the Museum's collections. There are on file a photograph of the specimens and a record of their provenience.

Hrdlička (1945, fig. 210) illustrates this art style on three cylindrical objects of ivory from Umnak Island. He states that they were found deep in the deposits and he associates them with his Pre-Aleut culture.

Two of these decorated ivory spools (fig. 15, C-D) from the bottom level of the D Midden on Amaknak Island are in the collections of Chicago Natural History Museum and there are on file photographic records of additional spools from the same locus and level.

The available evidence indicates that this art style is as early as any cultural manifestation in the Aleutian Islands. Although somewhat related styles appear in later periods, this style as defined and illustrated here is confined entirely to the early period.

ART STYLES OF THE MIDDLE PERIOD

The middle period of Aleut culture, as tentatively formulated in this paper, is represented by several art styles. One of these consists of formal, longitudinal designs confined to the middle of the object that was decorated. The motifs employed were straight lines; lines with short, triangular spurs (fig. 16, A and C); lines with semicircular spurs (fig. 16, B); and free-hand dot and circles (figs. 16-18). The free-hand dot and circles are always placed between two parallel lines (figs. 16, A-C; 17, C-D) and in some cases the circles tend to be square with rounded corners.

Another style consists of formal, longitudinal designs using diamond and triangular hachures (fig. 18, C-E), sometimes in combination with dots or very short spurs.

Other motifs that seem to belong to the middle period are spirals (fig. 17, A); zig-zags (figs. 17, B; 18, A and F); rectangular hachuring (fig. 18, B); short transverse lines in groups of three; and long triangular spurs in alternate opposition (fig. 18, D). This last motif is also used for the mouth of the effigy face carved near the base of the half-section of the compound collar illustrated in figure 16, C.

Six half-sections of compound collars for harpoons or lances have effigy faces carved near their bases (figs. 16-18). Two of these faces (fig. 16, A and C) have inlaid eyes—a stone peg inlaid in a drilled hole. Two other faces have sunken, diamond-shaped eyes (figs. 16, B; 17, F); one face has round, deep eyes that probably once contained stone inlays (fig. 18, D); and still another face has slit type eyes (fig. 17, E). One face (fig. 16, A) seems to represent

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FIG. 16. Design styles of the middle period. Scale 2:3.

a long-snouted animal similar to one represented in Old Bering Sea style 1 and Ipiutak art.

The eyes in two of the carved faces are bisected by diagonal lines (fig. 16, A and C). The same concept seems to have been applied to the free-hand dot and circles on one side of the bone lance-head shown in figure 17, C.

All of these art styles and/or motifs have interrelationships with one another and seem to hang together as a complex. Moreover, some of the art of the middle period seems to resemble that of Old Bering Sea style 1 and perhaps Ipiutak.

ART STYLE OF THE LATE PERIOD

The art of the late period is represented by several design styles and a number of motifs. Prominent among these is the small compass-drawn dot and circle or elaborations of this motif such as the dot and concentric circles or the spurred dot and circle (fig. 19, B-C).

Linear motifs include off-center, parallel lines in groups (fig. 19, F-H); median parallel lines in groups (fig. 19, A and E); and lines bordering a row of pricked or gouged dots (fig. 19, C-D).

Motifs and designs indicative of the late period persisted into historic times and are known to occur on ethnological specimens.

CONCEPTUALIZATION OF THE PERIODS

The basis for the formulation of the early period has been presented previously (Quimby, 1945, p. 76; 1946, p. 20), but for purposes of orientation it is repeated briefly here.

The D site, probably the Xatacxan village of Jochelson (1925), on southwestern Amaknak Island, was a large midden about twenty-four feet thick. During the war a road bed was cut into the upper sixteen feet of this midden. Cultural materials from the upper sixteen feet of midden were salvaged by Dr. Alvin R. Cahn, while he was stationed on Amaknak Island as a naval officer. Excavations undertaken by Dr. Cahn into the lowermost eight feet of midden beneath the road bed produced additional cultural objects. The materials from the upper and lower proveniences were kept separate, thus making possible stratigraphic analyses of a gross kind.

Many of the artifacts obtained by Dr. Cahn from the D site were donated to Chicago Natural History Museum. Included in this collection were a number of decorated objects. The motifs and

design elements on the decorated objects from the lowermost eight feet of the D Midden were different from the motifs and design elements found in the upper sixteen feet of the midden. Moreover, since the lower block of midden was stratigraphically inferior to the upper block, the lower block was the older, and therefore its contents were older than the contents of the upper block.

The lower block of midden contained decorated objects with motifs and design elements that I have considered representative of the early period, whereas the upper block contained decorated objects with motifs and design elements that I have considered indicative of the middle and late periods.

With possibly one exception, none of the published literature on archaeology of the Aleutian Islands describes or illustrates styles of design characteristic of the early period as tentatively formulated in this paper. The exception is the account of Hrdlička's work on Umnak Island. In the lower half of a large midden near Nikolski there were two cylindrical ornaments of ivory engraved with large compass-drawn dots and circles and other design elements characteristic of one of the styles of the early period (Hrdlička, 1945, pp. 378, 464, and fig. 210). The linear decoration on some lance-heads (op. cit., fig. 200, first and third at left) from the midden near Nikolski is somewhat suggestive of early period decoration. These lance-heads probably accompanied a burial found deep in the midden (op. cit., p. 380), but this is not certain. In any event the sources at my disposal indicate early period decoration only at Amaknak and nearby Umnak.

The concept of the middle period has been derived from a number of different assumptions and sources of evidence. Most of the decorated material which in this paper has been tentatively assigned to the middle Aleut period came from the B site on western Amaknak Island. The B site was a large prehistoric midden from eight to ten feet thick. It seems to have been the same midden examined by Hrdlička (op. cit., pp. 216-219, 246-249, 271-272) and perhaps is the Amaknak site of Jochelson (1925, pp. 37-38).

In Chicago Natural History Museum there are two collections from the B site. One collection was obtained by Dr. Cahn, while he was stationed on Amaknak Island. Cahn's collection from the B site is a small part of the large collection of Amaknak Island artifacts that he has donated to Chicago Natural History Museum. His collection from the B site contained ten decorated objects. The other collection from the B site was obtained in



FIG. 17. Design styles of the middle period. Scale 2:3.

1944-45 by Mr. Dennis Van Barriger, who at that time was a member of the military forces stationed on Amaknak Island. Mr. Van Barriger's collection was excavated from pits sunk into the upper half of the midden and from a grave about five feet beneath the surface of the midden.

This grave, according to Mr. Van Barriger, contained two flexed skeletons and a number of burial offerings. Both skeletons were covered with whale-bones and slabs of slate-like stone lying as if they were parts of a fallen roof of a tomb. One skull had a layer of white pebbles beneath it.

Decorated objects of bone and ivory among the burial offerings in this grave consisted of five complete half-sections of compound collars for harpoons or lances (figs. 16, A-C; 17, F; and 18, D); and one elaborately barbed lance-head (fig. 17, C). Three of the half-sections of compound collars for harpoons and the barbed lance-head have designs using the free-hand dot and circle motif (fig. 16, A-C; 17, C); all five of the half-sections have carved heads at their bases (fig. 16, A-C; 17, F; and 18, D); and one half-section (fig. 18, D) and the back of the barbed lance-head (fig. 17, C) have diamond-shaped hatching or a variation of the motif. This motif and variations were present also in the upper sixteen feet of deposit at the D site, but were absent from the earliest level.

Other decorated objects in the Van Barriger collection from the B site are a fragmentary lance-head of bone and a small ornament of ivory. The lance-head (fig. 18, F) has a double line zig-zag motif perfectly in keeping with middle Aleut art styles. The decoration on the ivory ornament, however, consists of vertical and diagonal bands filled with single rows of fine dots—a style probably belonging to early period Aleut art.

In the Cahn collection from the B site there are twelve decorated objects of bone. Two of these are done in the crude style of the early period. The other ten have middle period designs and motifs.

Among the decorated objects secured by Dr. Cahn from the upper sixteen feet of midden at the D site are three or more specimens with middle period elements and designs. A fragment of a lance-head (fig. 18, E) and a fish effigy (fig. 18, C) are decorated with diamond-shaped hachures and dots. A broken lance-head (fig. 17, D) bears decoration that uses the free-hand dot and circle between two parallel lines. Other decorated objects from the upper sixteen feet of the D Midden exhibit motifs and designs characteristic of the late period.

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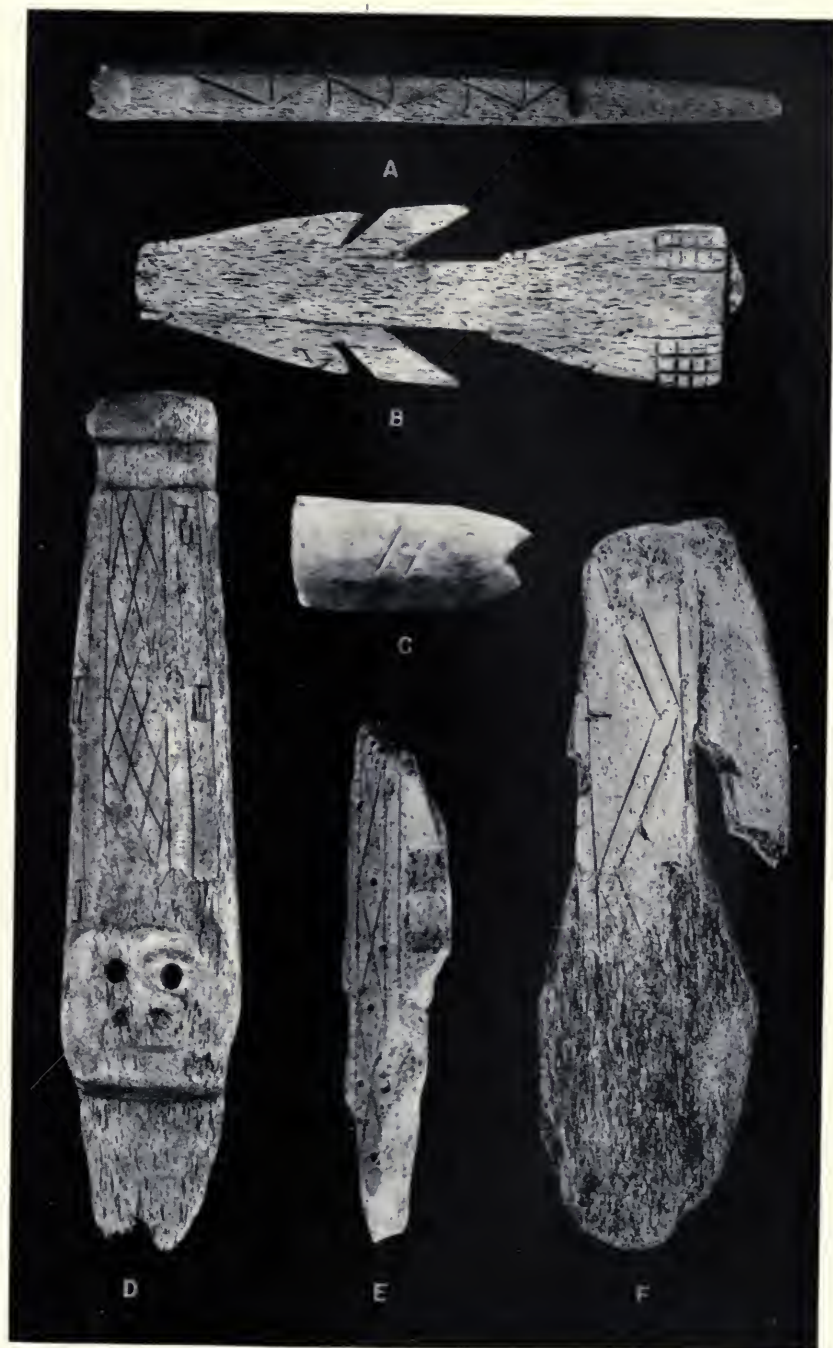


FIG. 18. Design styles of the middle period. Scale 2:3.



FIG. 19. Design styles of the late period. Scale 6:7.

Jochelson does not illustrate any middle period decoration from the middens he investigated on Amaknak Island. However, at the Ukix site north of Nikolskoye on Umnak Island, Jochelson recovered a lance-head with typical middle period decoration (1925, plate 23, fig. 3), a design using the free-hand dot and circle motif. At the Nutxakax site, also on Umnak Island, but south of the village of Nikolskoye, Jochelson found a bone haft for a knife decorated with diamond-shaped hachures and free-hand dot and circles (1925, figs. 69, A and B; p. 93).

Hrdlička (1945, fig. 202, no. 5) illustrates a decorated half-section of a compound collar for a harpoon or lance from the midden near Nikolskoye on Umnak. The decoration consists of parallel lines in groups and short spurs. A similar object from Cernovski on Unalaska Island (Hrdlička, loc. cit., no. 6) also exhibits middle period motifs and design—parallel lines in groups and diamond-shaped hachure.

Middle period art, then, according to the available evidence, seems to have been confined to middens or levels of middens in the eastern half of the Aleutian Island chain, specifically on Amaknak, Umnak, and Unalaska. The apparent absence of middle period and early period art as far west as Attu, Agatu, and Semichi may have temporal significance.

Late period art, for instance, is well represented in the western Aleutians. Hrdlička (1945, fig. 203) illustrates a decorated object from Agatu. The late period design engraved upon this object uses the small, compass-drawn dot and circle motif. A toggle type harpoon head from a midden on Attu (fig. 19, B) in Chicago Natural History Museum also has late period decoration using the small compass-drawn dot and circle motif. Jochelson (1925, plate 26, fig. 28) illustrates another example of the small, compass-drawn dot and circle as a motif in the decoration of a sewing implement from Attu.

In the eastern Aleutians there are the following occurrences of artifacts with late period designs: The upper sixteen feet of midden at the D site contained three artifacts exhibiting design characteristics of the late period. These artifacts are a bone lance-head with a blade slot (a late period characteristic) and decorated sparsely with a linear design (fig. 19, G); an ivory ornament engraved with lines and a row of gouged dots (fig. 19, D); and a toggle harpoon head with a design containing the compass-drawn dot and circle motif (fig. 19, C; also Quimby, 1946, fig. 11).

In the Chicago Natural History Museum's collection from the A Midden (Jochelson's Tanaxtaxax site) there is a broken lance-head with a blade slot (a late period characteristic) and linear decoration of a late period style (fig. 19, F). A toggle harpoon head of bone from the same midden exhibits late period characteristics both in form and in design (fig. 19, A; also Quimby, 1946, fig. 12). A similar design is found on a slotted lance-head from Attu (fig. 19, H) in the collections of Chicago Natural History Museum.

Late period designs and motifs are found on ethnological specimens obtained from Aleuts of historic times. Ivanov (1928, plate IV, figs. 4-8, 11-13, and 16) illustrates variations of the compass-drawn dot and circle from bone plates attached to Aleut headgear. Some of these very late designs in elaborated form are superficially suggestive of one of the early period design styles. Hoffman (1897, plate 49, figs. 3 and 6) illustrates historic Aleut artifacts engraved with compass-drawn dot and circle motifs characteristic of the late period design styles.

Thus late period design styles are present in archaeological sites that are prehistoric as well as in ethnological collections made in the nineteenth century. Moreover, late period design styles seem to have been distributed throughout the Aleutian Islands, whereas early and middle period design styles seem to have been lacking in the far western islands of the chain.

The establishment of a tentative time perspective in Aleutian archaeology rests not only on data such as have been presented but also on a number of assumptions. First of all, one may assume that not all of the five or more village sites on a small island like Amaknak were occupied simultaneously. More likely these village sites represent segments of varying duration and degree of overlap in the cultural continuum of the island as a whole.

One may also assume that the upper sixteen feet of midden at the D site would have shown cultural change if excavation had been in terms of 12-inch levels or even 1-meter levels instead of a single block of midden sixteen feet thick. This thick block of midden contained motifs and design elements as well as other cultural materials representative of both middle and late periods. Presumably, stratigraphic excavation of the upper sixteen feet of the D Midden would provide the data to make a separation of the middle and late periods at this site. But until such stratigraphic excavations are undertaken, one can only recognize that the middle and late period decorative complexes both occur in the upper sixteen

feet and neither occurs in the lowermost eight feet, which contained decorative material representative of the early period.

The late period design styles can be anchored at the top of the cultural continuum by virtue of the fact that they persisted into historic times. But neither early nor middle period design styles persisted into historic times. When the late period motifs are

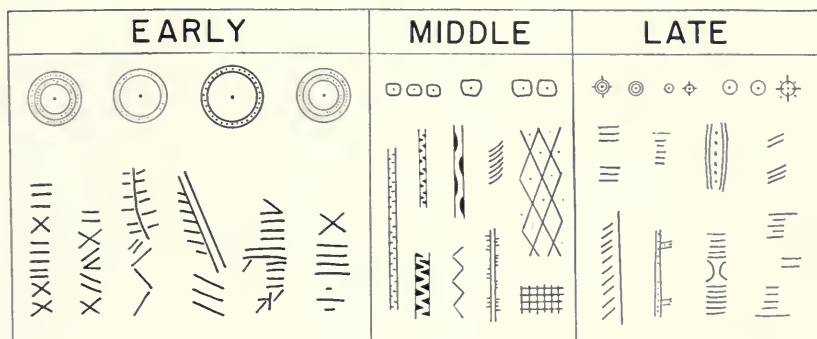


FIG. 20. Summary of design styles by period.

eliminated from the upper sixteen feet of midden at the D site the residuum consists of middle period styles.

Moreover, the B Midden contained decorative patterns and motifs characteristic of the middle period, largely to the exclusion of those representative of the early and late periods. Therefore, it seems reasonable to assume that the B Midden is practically a "pure" middle period site.

The Museum collection from the A Midden contained late period material to the exclusion of middle and early period materials. Thus, at least the part of the A Midden from which this material came seems to represent a late period occupancy.

The data of Jochelson and Hrdlička suggest a similar situation on Umnak Island. On Umnak at the Nikolskoye site early period design was found deep in the midden. Probably there were middle period art styles in the upper part of the midden, but late period styles seem to have been absent. At the Ukix and Nutxakax sites on Umnak, Jochelson found middle period designs. Hrdlička found middle period designs on objects from a midden on Unalaska, and it seems most probable that the early and late periods also are represented in the design styles of other middens on Unalaska.

A brief summary of these design styles by period is visualized in figure 20.

CRITIQUE OF HYPOTHESIS

The data presented in this paper were the stimuli leading to the hypothesis that the prehistory of the Aleutian Islands can be viewed in terms of three periods. However, these data are insufficient to demonstrate the hypothesis. For one thing, there are too few data dealing with stratigraphy, and the stratigraphic information that is available was not collected first hand by a trained archaeologist. Moreover, the conceptualization of the specific design styles is not well supported. Consequently, the hypothesis of three periods as presented here is tentative and subject to adjustment as additional data may warrant. It is my intention to test this hypothesis in terms of other classes of objects, harpoon types, chipped stone, lamps, etc., from the collections in Chicago Natural History Museum and by any other available sources.

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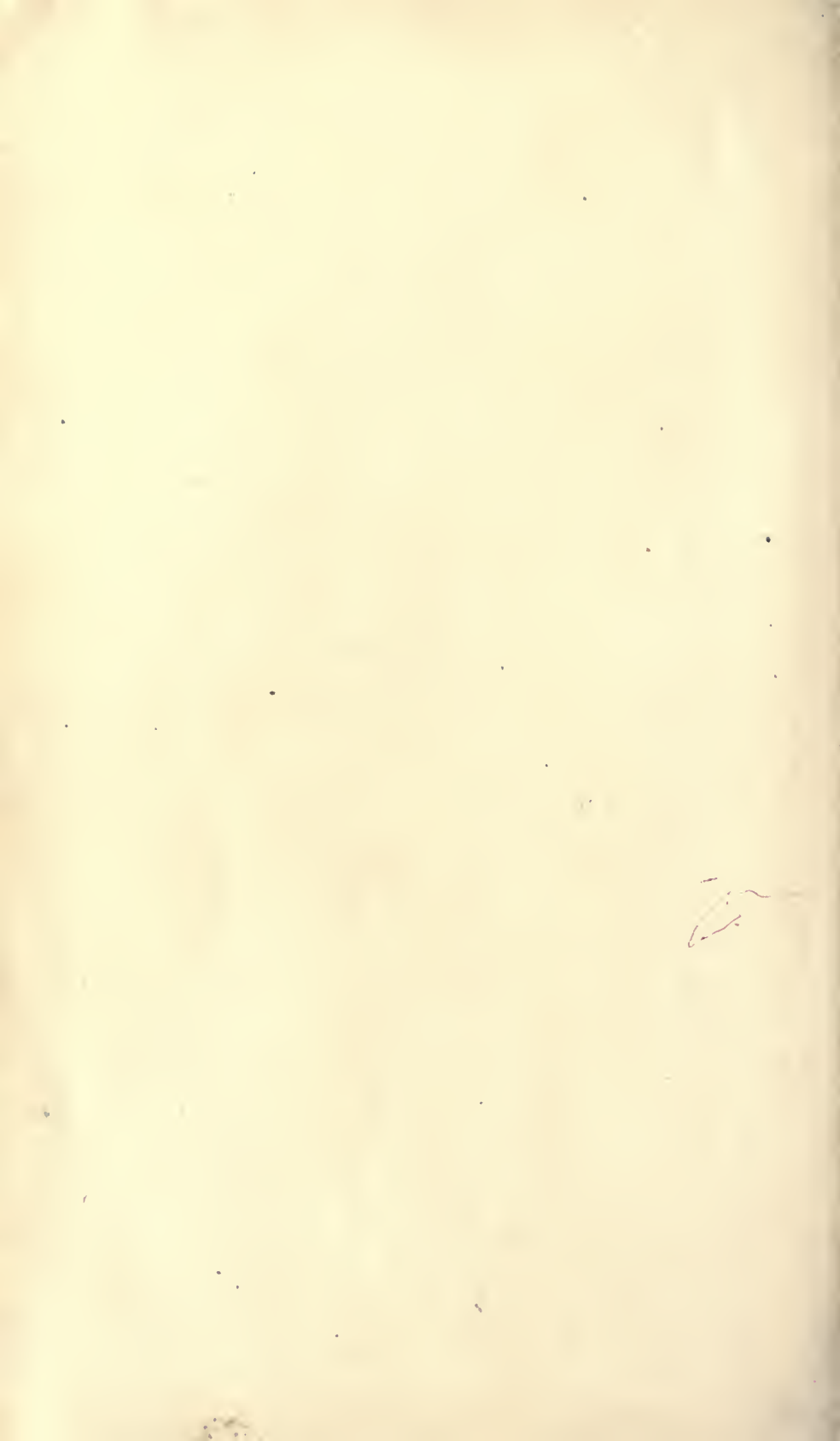
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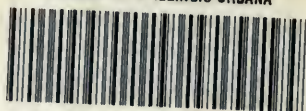
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